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ABSTRACT

A model program of support for non-traditional women students has been developed at Texas Woman's University (TWU). Based on a pilot study, several steps were taken to assist these re-entry students at TWU. For example, in spring semester of 1983, a committee for re-entry students was established, with a student organization--Women in Non-traditional Group Support (WINGS)--under its advisement. During the fall semester of 1983, additional steps were taken to provide further assistance to these students. A room in the student union was set aside for their organization, and publicity was generated. After these developmental stages, additional information was gathered from the students. They affirmed their support for WINGS and expressed preferences for two primary areas of help: counseling and career advice. Several counseling sessions were offered, based on re-entry student perceptions about barriers. Solutions were offered by the university for some barriers, such as offering classes in extended locations and providing financial aid. TWU also provided WINGS programs for other concerns such as identity and personal relationship problems. WINGS has also held career choice and development sessions and scheduled individual career counseling sessions. Although the TWU model for counseling and career advisement is a relatively new one, it can serve as a model for the next decade in higher education. (KC)

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Re-entry Women Students in Higher Education: A Model for Non-traditional Support Programs in Counseling and Career Advisement

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Re-entry Women Students in Higher Education: A Model for Non-traditional Support Programs in Counseling and Career Advisement*

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Rationale

In the last decade, there have been considerable changes at varied institutions of higher learning. More recently, the career advisement and counseling areas for women students in particular have been addressed and even expanded at several institutions (Brandenburg, 1974; Creange, 1981; Gibbs, 1981; Hetherington & Hudson, 1981). Although a divergent group of women may be represented at these institutions, a primary focus on re-entry women students and their needs in relation to these two service areas, career advisement and counseling, has emerged (Atelsek & Gomberg, 1977; Barbier, 1971; Bennett et al., 1981). The focus is due, in part, to the increasing numbers of re-entry women students who actually account for the "new" student population, who are returning to school at the undergraduate and graduate levels after a break

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in their education, or who are the "potential" student population for the next decades (Allain, 1981; Carlson, 1977). For example, the "Census Bureau reported that between 1975 and 1978, the numbers of women between the ages of 24 and 34 returning to school rose 187 percent" (Weinstein, 1981, p. 1). Recent statistics still reveal similar trends (Fisher-Thompson & Kuhn, 1981). Along with the gloomy forecast regarding declining numbers of 18-22 yr. olds now and in the coming decades at several institutions (Fisher-Thompson, 1981), there has also been a positive note due to the emergence of the re-entry women student population (Tittle & Denker, 1980). The diverse characteristics of this group such as age, economic status, their perceptions of situational and psychological barriers, and other factors are a reality that educators and administrators have had to confront (Lourie & Mayo, 1977; Bardwick, 1979; Fisher-Thompson, 1981). In doing so, several non-traditional programs have been established in several areas, but particularly in career advisement and counseling.

In career advisement, an emphasis on career and life planning, vocational development with the emphasis on testing or educational-vocational information

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workshops, use of cooperative education, and other areas has emerged (Tittle & Denker, 1980; Weinstein, 1981). In counseling, an emphasis on career counseling with regard to non-traditional and traditional jobs, mini-courses or workshops on time management, stress management and education, assertiveness training, and other areas has emerged (Tittle & Denker, 1980). Thus, in these areas, several models of non-traditional programs have evolved at respective institutions.

The model for non-traditional support programs at Texas Woman's University, particularly in its more innovative stages and related developments, is a relatively new model in terms of its focus for re-entry students. The model has been developed from the results of surveys, interviews, and related comments from re-entry students. Similarly, the support from the administrative personnel has also been an asset in these developmental stages.

Developmental Stages

In January 1983, an orientation meeting, designed by the Office of Student Life, was held. This meeting was scheduled for the new students who were enrolling at TWU for the spring semester. Although there were general sessions for all new students, they were later

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grouped according to their status, namely traditional or non-traditional. Some characteristics of the non-traditional students were: an average age of 29; a dominant commuter-based population; a re-entry population that included singles, married, divorced or separated individuals, and single parents or step-parents; and a non-traditional population that was representative of varied ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. These non-traditional students attended several special sessions that were tailored to their needs. Additional information was also collected to aid in the development of future programs.

At the sessions, a pilot study was conducted to examine the perceptions of these re-entry students regarding situational and psychological barriers in higher education, if applicable, and related non-traditional support programs. A section for comments was also included for additional insights. A Likert Scale, which was used to measure their responses, indicated their support of such sessions.

To question one, "I feel that my age could present some barriers in terms of my re-entry in higher education," they responded: 4.2% strongly agreed, 45.8% agreed, 4.2% no opinion, 33.3% disagreed, and

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and 12.5% strongly disagreed. To question two, "I feel the need for an organization that would help re-entry students with their issues and concerns (e.g. financial aid, child care, student personnel services, career planning, counseling, and other areas)," they responded: 56.5% strongly agreed, 39.1% agreed, and 4.4% disagreed. To question three, "I feel that diverse programs and/or workshops for re-entry students should be offered on a regular basis at the university," they responded: 45.8% strongly agreed, 45.8% agreed, and 8.4% no response. In the comment section, the respondents reaffirmed their support of our services rendered at the sessions and their preferences for future programs.

Given the results of the pilot study, several steps were taken to assist these re-entry students at TWU. For example, during the spring semester 1983, a University Committee for Re-entry Students was established; a student organization, under the advisement of the university committee, was also established; officers for the student organization were selected and a schedule for programs was made; and some joint program sessions with the Cooperative Education Office were scheduled.

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In August 1983, during the summer orientation for re-entry students, announcements about the organizations and related programs were also made. During the fall semester 1983, additional steps were taken to provide further assistance to these students. For example, a room in the student union was designated for the student organization, their bi-monthly programs, and for usage as their lounge area; articles about their meetings or for re-entry women appeared in the school newspaper and TWU Update, a news release for administrators, faculty and staff; and the renovation of residence halls (e.g. as apartments, efficiency units, or modifications for children) particularly for re-entry students who were married or single parents was approved.

After these developmental stages, the university committee and the student organization for re-entry students (now called W.I.N.G.S. - Women in Non-traditional Group Support) continued to collect and analyze information during the fall semester 1983. For example, additional student responses from ongoing as well as new members of W.I.N.G.S. and responses from re-entry students in varied classes were used to reaffirm program preferences for bi-monthly meetings

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and other co-sponsored meetings and activities at the university. From a survey of 92 students, 90.22% indicated their ongoing support and interest in W.I.N.G.S., 6.52% gave no response, and 3.26% responded maybe. Again, respective comments on program preferences were related to several areas, but the two primary areas were counseling and career areas. Thus, the officers in W.I.N.G.S. and the university committee with advisors continued to plan repetitive or more extensive sessions in these areas.

Counseling Program Sessions: Re-entry Student Concerns and Related Solutions

Re-entry Student Concerns. Several counseling sessions were offered, based on re-entry student perceptions about barriers, either situational or psychological barriers (Tittle & Denker, 1980). For example, the situational barriers that were cited by re-entry students were: (a) geographic location--many students indicated that commuting such distances to TWU caused difficulty in scheduling required and elective courses. It was also mentioned that geographic location was problematic in terms of economic factors, child care services, and transportation problems, and (b) socioeconomic levels--students

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indicated that they had difficulty in locating information about or attaining financial aid. Additionally, psychological barriers were equally problematic for re-entry students. For example, psychological barriers that were cited by re-entry students were: (a) the socialization process and the development of the female identity--students noted that their feminine identity had often been centralized on such roles as "wife" and "mother," while other aspects of their development of "self" were delayed, (b) the issues of sex role stereotypes--students in their mid-30's and 40's had learned traditional gender roles, and in spite of new, liberal values, had found the transitions and related adjustments difficult to deal with, (c) the basis of the marital relationship--students noted that there might be varying support from husbands, but there could also be subtle or explicit resentment from husbands, and (d) conflicting roles--students cited that their conflict with numerous roles such as student, homemaker, spouse, and mother could produce guilt.

Related Solutions. For the situational barriers, the following avenues for solutions were offered by W.I.N.G.S. and other university components:

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1. Geographical location. (a) several departments at the university, in response to the concerns and need for diverse schedules, offered courses that could be taken on a Monday-Wednesday or Tuesday-Thursday schedule, on Saturdays, at off-campus locations, and on alternating weeks/weekend schedules. Thus, many full-time re-entry students now come to the main campus or other locations for fewer days per week, (b) more information on carpools for commuting students is provided through several channels at the university to insure easier and more reliable access to such information, and (c) W.I.N.G.S. continues to provide information sessions with these areas at orientation meetings, on the bulletin board in their lounge area in the student union, and as part of their informal program announcements at regularly scheduled bi-monthly meetings.

2. Socioeconomic levels. (a) personnel in the financial aids office are now attending, on a regular basis, several orientation sessions for re-entry students. Representatives specifically address financial aids for re-entry students with diverse needs and (b) W.I.N.G.S. has had related speakers at bi-monthly meetings. In some cases, the financial aids area is

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highlighted with other student services by a representative from the Office of Student Life.

For the psychological barriers, the following avenues for solutions were offered by W.I.N.G.S. and other university components:

1. The socialization process and the development of the female identity, the issues of sex role stereotypes, the basis of marital relationships, and conflicting roles. (a) several bi-monthly meetings have been devoted to sessions on: understanding stressors in your life, stress management and reduction techniques, assertiveness training, "crises" in your life and some "pathfinders" approaches for these crises, time management, and other areas. These sessions have included both general and specific concerns of the re-entry student so that these diverse psychological barriers could be addressed, (b) the previously mentioned sessions are often provided by counselors from the counseling center and qualified professors and staff members from diverse components in the university. These representatives are consistently used to insure that these students are exposed to helpful personnel in the university but also to insure that they feel more comfortable with the university services and personnel that are available to them (e.g. extended

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counseling sessions, related testing areas and follow-up, advisement/counseling from appropriate faculty members, etc.). It is also important for these students to acknowledge that there are sensitive people who are willing and ready to provide such helpful insights, (c) several members of the university committee who also serve as advisors to W.I.N.G.S. are in the counseling centers or areas, teach related psychological courses, or teach related women's courses at the university, and (d) these meetings have been repeated and extended with other components, such as the co-sponsored sessions with the Cooperative Education division at the university. Again, exposure to relevant service areas in the university is a primary concern along with the generation of feelings that others care and are ready and willing to assist.

Career Advisement Sessions: Re-entry Student Concerns and Related Solutions

Re-entry Student Concerns. Like most traditional age students, the re-entry students still asked, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" However, the ongoing urgency associated with finding the answer to this question was acknowledged in particular with re-entry students. They cited that they needed to: (a) find

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out the varied information centers and related personnel at the university that would facilitate or reinforce related decision-making processes in the area of career choice(s), (b) take related tests that indicated aptitude for certain career(s) and tests that indicated preferences and values related to certain career(s), and (c) have ongoing and relevant workshops in these two areas.

Related Solutions. (a) W.I.N.G.S. has continued to schedule several sessions that cover the area of career choice and related development. Representatives from the Office of Career Planning and Placement hold workshops for this group, provide other workshops at varied campus locations, and schedule individual career counseling sessions with interested students, (b) a member of the university committee, who serves as an advisor to W.I.N.G.S., is a representative from the Office of Career Planning and Placement, (c) representatives from the counseling center are also regular leaders at the orientation sessions for re-entry students and at selective meetings for W.I.N.G.S. The availability of career-related tests at the counseling center and follow-up counseling about individual results are often covered in sessions,

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and (d) co-sponsored workshops in this area with the Cooperative Education division are often scheduled. When additional monies such as grant monies are available, additional letters are also sent to this target population. Since a primary goal of cooperative education is to integrate academics with related work experiences, the personnel in this division are particularly interested in re-entry students who desire the integration of these two areas in their degree program. Thus, several workshops have been designed to focus on the use of SIGI and related career inventories. The SIGI is an invaluable tool for re-entry students since it's an interactive program format that allows the student to assess the options that are available in terms of career direction(s) and how individual values relate to such options.

Summary. Although the TWU model for counseling and career advancement areas is a relatively new one, such a model, along with other advanced models in the literature, reaffirm the need to examine, share, and analyze our ideas about the changes in the university setting of tomorrow. Furthermore, if innovative and futuristic educators and administrators are not only

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cognizant and willing to communicate about these initial growth stages and related transition periods, but also cognizant and willing to address the related demands, it seems that we can be better prepared and less anxious about the next decade in higher education.

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